

"The Book of Tobit: Three Lessons For the 21st Century". The talk will cover themes related to family, children, temporary periods of despair and the finality of redemption.

As you are all likely aware, we are at the very end of the academic semester – at most universities across the country, we are finishing final exams and assigning grades...and I have to say that I am happy to see so many happy healthy people here with grandchildren...as a professor I have to warn you that finals is always a very dangerous time for grandparents. I have students whose grandparents have passed away three, four times over the course of their studies – always around the time of finals. So you can imagine my surprise when these same students introduce me to their grandparents at graduation. "Wow you look great for having died three times during final exams this year".

Another thing that happens around this time is that doctoral students are defending their dissertations. So...have you ever

noticed that dissertation titles are always structured like

“SOMETHING ESOTERIC: AN APPLICATION THAT NORMAL PEOPLE WILL UNDERSTAND”. Working on a good title is a critical part of the publication process.

This lead me to consider several options for my talk today –

1. The Book of Tobit: Letting our children go
2. The Book of Tobit: Angels among us
3. The Book of Tobit: Do not let your heart be troubled

By a show of hands, how many people are familiar with the Book of Tobit.

I am not surprised – and here is why. The Book of Tobit is part of the Apocrypha – which you will find in “this” bible...but not in “this” bible. Why the difference? If it’s in the bible, you will find these books after the old testament and before the new testament. They are considered to be deuterocanonical – they are not viewed as part of our canon – but rather “teaching stories” that were used

at the time they were written to communicate lessons. They are in no way considered to be historical documents.

There are a total of 14 books. In addition to Tobit, other books include Bel and the Dragon, Susanna, first and second Maccabees.

So, a brief summary of the story –

Tobit is living in Ninevah. His tribe and his people have been exiled there. We are told that he comes from some means and is an important member of his tribe. He is an upstanding member of his community. One of the things he is known to do is burying the dead who have been slain by the authorities. He is warned not to do this and the authorities strip him of all of his property and status. One day he buries a man from his community who was murdered – and fearing the authorities, he sleeps with one eye open. As the story goes, that night he is blinded by bird droppings and loses his sight. He is now blind and impoverished. Without any way to provide for his family – his wife and son Tobias – he prays for death.

He recalls a debt that is owed to him by a merchant in a far away town. However, he cannot now travel...but he can send his son. God sends the Angel Gabriel to them in the form of a man named “Azariah” – he represents himself as a distant relative. Tobit’s wife is understandably hesitant. He agrees to travel to Media with the young man and his dog to find the merchant and the funds.

After a long journey with lots of twists and turns, they arrive in Media, they find the merchant – who has a beautiful daughter – after another series of twists and turns, they marry...they return to Ninevah with the money and with a paste made from a fish that Azariah instructed Tobias to make during their journey. The paste is put in Tobit’s eyes restoring his sight.

The family lives for years in Ninevah – after Tobit dies at an old age, Tobias and his wife Sarah return to Media to live the rest of their lives with her family.

Today I think with a little Disney magic, Sarah could become a Disney Princess. The story follows a predictable arc of riches to

rags to riches – although the end point looks very different for all of the characters than the beginning point. As a narrative in character development...it is less Palindrome and more Homophone.

Biblical scholars have used this book to discuss the problems of reconciling evil in the world with divine justice – why bad things happen to good people.

I am 100% NOT a biblical scholar and I continue to struggle with the questions of why bad things happen to good people.

But there are three themes in this story that really resonate with me.

The first is related to sending of Tobias on a long journey. Tobit and his wife Anna are sending their only child – Tobias - out in the world with his dog and a stranger, to walk for days to a distant city. As a mother of a 17 year old daughter and a 14 year old son, I can only imagine the fear and apprehension that Anna had to reconcile to allow her son to embark on this journey. There are

natural dangers – animals, weather...there are human dangers – bandits and robbers along the way...he could get lost...he could get sick...he may not come back. He doesn't even have a cellphone with a geolocator where she can see his exact location 24/7.

This part of the story really hits home for me. As our oldest is moving closer to embarking on her own journey, my apprehension levels are rising. She will be going to a far away city for a few weeks this summer. There are natural dangers...there are human dangers...she could get lost. She may not come back.

I think I understand what Anna was feeling.

In the book "The Prophet" by Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, he writes:

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you...  
You are the bows from which your children  
as living arrows are sent forth...  
For even as He loves the arrow that flies,  
so He loves also the bow that is stable.

Tobias left. He had some life changing experiences. He left as a boy and came back as a man with a new wife.

Although within the narrative the character development of Tobias receives limited attention, and 10 years ago I never paid any attention to Tobias, his journey – and his return and reunification with his mother Anna are a source of inspiration for me as Cate embarks on her journey.

The second theme here that I have always found fascinating is the role of Azariah. As readers, we know that he is the angel Gabriel...although Tobit and Anna don't know that. They put their trust in a stranger.

The book "Tobit's Dog" is a modern retelling of this biblical story – set in depression era Appalachia. In that book there is a colorful character named "Ace" who enters the lives to Tobit and Anna. Unlike the biblical story, the readers of Tobit's Dog are not told that Ace is an angel...in fact, even though I was very familiar with

the Book of Tobit, I did not figure out that Ace was an angel until well into the story. In Tobit's Dog, Ace does not look like an Angel – he is depicted as scruffy...unshaven...has a guitar strung over his shoulder. He shows up on their doorstep claiming to be a distant relative. The only reason Tobit and Anna allow him in is their floppy eared bloodhound Okra, rolls on his foot for a belly rub – the ultimate validation of good character.

I believe in angels. My angels don't look like Gabriel. My angels look more like Ace – or maybe even Okra. They almost never come from my "tribe". I find that as I make myself open and available, unexpected people come into my life – and when I let them, they teach me things. But allowing angels to come into our lives requires a letting go – it requires us to bring down our walls, our arrogance, our self-assuredness that we have it all figured out.

As an old college professor – I suspect that I am learning more now from my students than they do from me. It's humbling to hear their stories – how hard it was for them to get to where they

are. And their moms back home who have sent their children here – and are looking forward to their return. The “Annas” of my students are in China, Vietnam, India, Bangladesh, Moldova and England. I know they think about their kids every day. I take that part of my job very seriously – I try to work with their children the way that I hope professors will eventually work with my children.

If I was going to write a dissertation title about the third lesson it might be “The Book of Tobit: If you are walking through the fires of hell, keep walking”.

Life is hard. Tobit had a wide range of life experiences that at some level I think we can all relate to – he was “wealthy”, he was poor...he was healthy, he was sick...his long term marriage to Anna was strained as marriages that last forever periodically are...he was persecuted by those who had authority over him...members of his community turned on him...while other supported him. The elements of this story are so common...we

could probably develop a list of dozens of books and movies that include these themes. Most of our own autobiographies would include some subset of these themes – if not all of them.

Depending on the day, I could probably pull out any of these and have a long discussion with a friend over a glass or two of wine.

In fact I think I have.

I have a tendency to overreact. I like to fix problems. Whatever the issue is – whether its mine or someone else's, my initial reaction is to fix it RIGHT NOW. I tend to be a bit of a reactionary. As a result, I tend to believe that when things are good – they are going to be great forever – when things are firing on all cylinders how could anything ever be wrong again? Yeah! Happy Happy Happy! But when things are not going well – life is over...I may lose my job...my parent just received a bad diagnosis?... My God My God Why have you forsaken me?

I can go from this to this to this all in the same week. You may want to pat Steve on the back next time you see him and express your support.

We are not told in the Book of Tobit the timeline of the full arc – was it weeks? Months? Years? Maybe it does not matter. Maybe that is part of the point. The omission of that detail may have been by design.

My learning from this is that events unfold over time. Things are rarely as bad as they seem at the time...but things are also rarely as great as they seem at the time. The depth and breadth of time is something to embrace. Narratives need time to evolve – and sometimes they need our intervention, but sometimes we need to be patient and trust the process. I frequently say to my students – “do not let your heart be troubled” – which actually comes from the gospel of John. I say it so much that they will actually start a meeting with me by saying “Dr. Priestley, my heart is troubled”.

Hearts are rarely troubled forever. Like Tobit, we all have a life narrative arc.

So...if you are considering a Ph.D. in Theology...and would like to make Tobit your central topic, I have three dissertation titles ready for you:

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